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Boys do cry: Adam Smith on wealth and expressing emotions

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Abstract

Recent studies on crying show that crying is more common in happier, freer, and richer countries than in poorer and less free countries. These results can sound counterintuitive and contradict the hypothesis that crying is more observable in countries where people experience more distress. Adam Smith may offer an explanation: In the severe hardship of poverty, showing emotion and distress can be read as a sign of weakness, attracting no sympathy and compromising survival. As a result, emotional displays are avoided. Instead, wealthier commercial societies offer ease and tranquility which allows individuals to express their emotions with fewer negative consequences.

Keywords: Adam Smith, expression of emotion, crying, stoicism, commercial societies, distress, poverty

Contrary to Charles Darwin's study on emotions — *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* ([1872] 2009) — which hypothesized that 'savages and barbarians' would cry more than 'civilized' people, there is an increasing amount of evidence that crying is a luxury which only people in rich country can afford. In May 2016 Matthew Sweet published in *The Economist's* magazine 1843 an article with the suggestive and telling title of *The Luxury of Tears*; in 2015 Thomas Dixon published a volume under the title *Weeping Britannia*; in 2011 Dianne A. van Hemert, Fons J.R. van de Vijver and Ad J.J. M. Vingerhoets published a seminal result of a cross-cultural study of crying. In 1759, Adam Smith published *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which is not a study about crying, but which contains explanations which fit remarkably well with today's data on crying.

Worldwide data from the science of crying today seems to indicate that crying takes place more and more often in rich and free countries. The more distressed a country is, the less crying is reported. Crying is positively correlated to subjective well-being, extraversion, wealth, political freedom, and individualism. Women cry more than men, especially the wealthier, the more equalitarian, the more democratic, and the more individualistic their country of residence is. Australian and American men are among the men crying most often in the world, Nigerian and Bulgarians men the least often. Swedish women cry the most, women from Ghana the least.

While van Hemert et al. were surprised by their results, Adam Smith may not have been. For him, the more 'polite' a society is, the more one is able to express one's emotions. For Smith, indeed:

the emotion and vivacity with which the French and the Italians, the most polished nations on the continent, expressed themselves are a surprise among strangers traveling among them. A young French nobleman will weep in the presence of the whole court upon being refused a regiment. An Italian expresses more emotion on being condemned a fine of twenty shillings than an Englishman on receiving the sentence of death. (TMS V.2.10)

For Smith the lack of expression of emotion is a characteristic of savages and barbarians. Since savage and barbarian societies tend to be poorer than commercial societies, Smith's story fits today's data.

'Savage' and 'barbarian' are not meant as disparaging words. Smith follows the typical eighteenth-century characterization of different societies. The hunter-gatherer societies are generally called savages, the pastoral barbarians, the agricultural civilized, and the commercial society are refined or polished. Savages and barbarians are characterized by violence and brute force, and are male dominated societies, in which women are property and there is slavery. Agricultural and commercial societies are polite (as opposed to rude), more humane, more delicate, and more feminine. Feminine is a positive characteristic of polished nations. Femininity is different from effeminacy, which remains a degeneration to avoid (TMS IV.I.21 and I.iii.i.9, IV.2.1, V.2.7, V.2.9; for a complete analysis see Sebastiani 2013; Justman 1993; for more on different ages of society see Berry 2013 and Smith 2006).

Regardless of the kind of societies in which they live, Smith tells us that all people have an innate desire to be approvable and to receive the approbation of others, as well as not to be disapproved of, and not to receive the disapprobation of others. This implies that most of the time, our behavior will be in line with what our peers expect us to do, with the norms of our society. We are the proper object of approbation when an impartial spectator from our society would approve of our conduct. Similarly, we are the proper object of disapprobation when an impartial spectator from our society would disapprove of our conduct. So we adjust the pitch of our passions to meet the approbation of the spectator, that is, to what is appropriate in our society (TMS I.ii.intro-3).

The adjustment of the pitch of our passions is possible because we exercise command over our passions. Self-command is indispensable for adjusting the pitch of our passions to what is appropriate in our society and for our rank. An uncontrolled expression of our passions is never appropriate, possibly with the exception of a young child (TMS III.2.22): The expression of our passions is therefore always somehow controlled. How controlled will depend on what is appropriate under the circumstances of that time and place. In Smith's society a father appropriately expresses grief in private at the loss of his only child, but the same public expression of grief would be 'unpardonable' in a general at the head of an army (TMS 5.2.5). So the habitual association of specific behaviors with the peculiar circumstances of some professions makes us think that that specific behavior is what the customary character appropriate for that profession is (severity in a priest, for example). When we observe a character different from what we thought customarily appropriate for that profession, we are apt to criticize it as inappropriate (or 'unpardonable').

Similarly, Smith writes,

the different situations of different ages and countries are apt, in the same manner, to give different characters to the generality of those who live in them, and their sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality, that is either blamable or praise-worthy, vary according to that degree which is usual in their own country, and in their own times. (TMS V.2.7)

Another way of thinking about it is to think of Smith's assumption of radical equalitarianism at birth (Peart and Levy 2005): There are no natural differences in character. Those differences emerge from the circumstances to which we are habitually exposed. We would therefore expect different behaviors and different characters in rude poor countries from polite rich countries. Rude societies are poor as they do not yet rely on commerce. Their poverty induces hardness and continuous distress and danger. Their poverty is such that people die of pure want. This is a concept so deep in Smith that he opens the *Wealth*

of Nations by repeating it: The poverty of pre-commercial societies is such to induce people to abandon children and elderly to be devoured by wild beasts (Smith [1776] 1981, introduction).

The hardship to which savages are constantly exposed habituates them to distress. Expressing any of the emotions which this distress excites is a sign of weakness which would not generate any sympathy or indulgence from any fellow-savage. So there is no point to expressing any emotion, and a savage does indeed express none. Complete self-command, and its consequent complete lack of emotional expression, is a virtue that finds full power in pre-commercial societies. The complete lack of expression of emotion of a North-American savage requires a level of self-command that is unconceivable for a European (TMS V.2.9). In this long paragraph Smith continues:

All savages are too occupied with their own wants and necessities to give much attention to those of another person. A savage expects no sympathy from those about him and disdains, upon that account, to expose himself by allowing the least weakness to escape him. (TMS V.2.9)

This may be a reason for Smith's strong condemnation of the ancient Stoic philosophers who promote such cultivation of self-command as to eliminate any demonstration of passions, to the extent to which a man should not feel any more for the loss of his father or of his son than for the loss a random man's father or son. Smith tells us that 'such unnatural indifference, far from exciting our applause, would incur our highest disapprobation' (TMS III.3.13). Stoics may be willing to superimpose an ethics of hardship typical of savages and barbarians to a more polished environment, which makes it inappropriate and therefore condemnable (cf. Raphael, D.D. and Macfie, A.L. *Introduction* of Smith [1759] 1984; Raphael 2007; Vivenza 2001; Vivenza 2005). This may also be a reason for why Smith does not condemn the savage practice of infanticide in very poor societies, while he does condemn it in the rich and commercial Athens: An ethics of hardship typical of savages and barbarians is inappropriate and condemnable in an age where that hardship is no longer present (see also Levy and Peart 2013).

Like the weeping general at the head of the army, this is 'unpardonable' as it is inappropriate.

In a civilized society the only circumstances vaguely similar to savage conditions are 'the boisterous and stormy sky of war and factions' (TMS III.3.37). By the necessities of war, a soldier faces constant hardship and danger. He has to violate life and property over and over again, so much so that 'it extinguishes the sacred regard for both which is the foundation of justice and humanity'. Indeed, for Smith, the continuous neglect of humanity, due to the necessity of self-command on the battlefield, eventually weakens and extinguishes it.

Notice that Smith is more radical on this tradeoff between self-command and humanity than some of his contemporaries. Adam Ferguson argues that in civilized societies humanity is present also under the boisterous and stormy sky of wars and factions--at least indirectly. Ferguson notices that Homeric epic poems leave the readers and the heroes cold to the death of an enemy. Similar poems written in commercial times make the readers and the heroes weep at the death of their enemies instead: 'Hector falls unpitied . . . [The modern hero] employs his valor to rescue the distressed, and to protect the innocent' (Ferguson [1767] 1995: 191). Similarly, David Hume describes soldiers of commercial societies as highly engaged on the battlefield and yet when the battle is over they depose their arms, 'disinvest themselves of the brute, and resume the men' (Hume [1752] 1985: 274).

Going back to Smith, for him, 'Hardness is the character most suitable to the circumstances of a savage, sensitivity to those of the one who lives in a civilized society' (TMS V.2.13). Polished societies have more sensibility and more humanity, and as a consequence they can afford to express more emotion (TMS V.2.10). The reason Smith gives for why the virtues based on humanity are more cultivated in civilized societies than the ones based on self-denial and the command of the passions is that

The general security and happiness which prevails in the age of civility and politeness afford little exercise to the contempt of danger, to the patience in enduring labor, hunger, and pain. Poverty may easily be avoided and the contempt of it therefore

almost ceases to be a virtue. The abstinence from pleasure becomes less necessary and the mind is more at liberty to unbend itself, and to indulge its natural inclinations in all those particular respect. (TMS V.2.8)

Notice that Smith says something quite similar in *Wealth of Nations* when he explains that we have two kinds of moralities: an austere one for the poor and a loose one for the rich. The rich can afford exuberant behaviors, the poor cannot (WN V.i.g.10). When constraints change, behavior changes.

Commercial societies are rich. The wealth of commercial societies allows people to live in ease and tranquility because there is always enough to live on and to actually live well. Remember the conclusion of Chapter One of Book One of the *Wealth of Nations*: A poor British worker lives in better conditions than an African king who is master of hundreds of naked savages (WN i.i). With the exception of wars or factions, which involve only a small part of the population, in commercial societies people tend to live 'in the mild sunshine of undisturbed tranquility, in the calm retirement of undissipated and philosophical leisure [where] the soft virtue of humanity flourishes the most' (TMS III.3.37).

So, Smith's story fits the story Dixon tells: Britain is a weeping country. It has been for a long time. The stereotype of the cold expressionless British stiff upper lip is a recent and temporary well-defined belligerent period in British history, roughly going from Charles Dickens (1870) to Winston Churchill (1965), peaking during the First and the Second World Wars:

The stiff upper lip had its purpose in the Kuching prisoner of war camp, and had served the same purpose during Britain's emergence as the world's greatest empire, in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. But that era is just one part of a much longer and more interesting historical story. (Dixon 2015)

For Smith, it is a person at ease who can best attend the distress of others. In this, he is telling a different story from Hume, even if the end of it is very similar. For Hume commercial societies bring about more humanity, but that is not because of the increased ease and tranquility but because of the increased occasions in which men and women can interact. Being exposed to the company of women allows men to more easily shed their rudeness and develop more delicate feelings and the ability to express them, for example through the arts of gallantry (Hume [1752] 1985: 271).

van Hemert et al. describe the positive correlation between wealth and crying. But the account of Smith presented here describes how commercial societies bring about more humanity. The attentive reader at this point should ask: Are we talking about the same things? I would like to

make the case that the answer is, yes, or at least close enough.

A consistent result in van Hemert et al. is that women cry more than men, and the wealthier and more equalitarian the country, the more this gap is present. For Smith,

humanity is the virtue of a woman. [...] Humanity consists merely in the exquisite fellow-feeling which the spectator entertains with the sentiments of the person principally concerned, so as to grieve for their suffering, resent their injuries, and rejoice their good fortune. The most humane actions [...] consist only in doing what this exquisite sympathy would of his own accord prompt us to do. (TMS IV.2.10)

In addition, with this definition of humanity, Smith tells us that in order to be humane we need to feel what another person feels, to suffer with them, to rejoice with them. But if the other person shows no emotions, how can we share emotions with them? Humanity requires that the 'person principally concerned' shows the appropriate expression of pain, shows the appropriate expression of joy, shows the appropriate expression of resentment. The appropriate amount for a commercial society, differently from a savage society, is more than zero. Humanity is present and flourishes in commercial societies because in commercial societies we do not have those savage hardships which prevent us from expressing our emotions, but we have that ease that allows us to express our emotions instead.

In civilized nations the passions of men are not commonly so furious or so desperate. They are often clamorous and noisy but are seldom very hurtful and seem frequently to aim at no other satisfaction but that of convincing the spectator that they are in the right to be so much moved and of procuring his sympathy and approbation. (TMS V.2.11)

In concentration or refugee camps people would not cry. People who visit those camps today cry,

Sweet reminds us. The hardship of being in the camp was and is self-evident; it did not and does not require any convincing.

If you live in really distressing and difficult circumstances, crying is a luxury. We know when we have been bereaved, we might be so shocked or traumatized that tears do not come. So perhaps we should see tears as a sign of moderate grief, of bearable negative emotion. If you are enduring extreme distress or extreme hardship, that is not the time for tears. (Dixon 2015)

Adam Smith could have written these words.

Adam Smith may therefore offer a coherent possible explanation for today's data and analysis of crying, which sees more crying in wealthy and happy countries than in poor and distressed ones.

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